

Affirming Our Values – Serving Our State

Richard L. McCormick

Richard L. McCormick, a respected scholar and eminent leader in higher education, was inaugurated as the 19th president of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, on April 13, 2003. Following are his remarks.

Governor McGreevey, members of the Board of Governors and Board of Trustees, students, faculty, staff, and alumni of Rutgers, and citizens of New Jersey—*thank you* for your presence this afternoon and for the opportunity you have given me to return to Rutgers as its president. I will repay your trust with leadership that befits our university today. It's good to be home!

I want to express very special thanks to my family—to my parents, who have belonged to the Rutgers community for over half a century, and to my wife Suzanne and our children Betsy and Michael who, with me, are coming back to New Jersey.

The pageantry of today's ceremony cannot disguise the troubles of our time. The war in Iraq and the threat of terrorism at home have brought new levels of anxiety to our country and the world. Our economy remains weak.

And yet, despite these realities, we have within our hands enduring instruments of the highest and noblest human purposes. We have classrooms in which to share knowledge and values. We have studios, libraries, and laboratories where we add to the treasury of art, wisdom, and know-how that humankind has accumulated over the centuries. We have communities and people whom we are privileged to serve through learning, healing, and helping. Together these and other instruments of human purpose form a university, *our* university called Rutgers, and never was the work we do more important than it is today. Fondly do we hope for better times, but the challenges of today are before us, and Rutgers will meet them.

Universities like ours are ancient institutions. Originally centers of learning, they have also become places of research and discovery. Where first they taught the arts and sciences, they now also offer professional education. For centuries cloistered in the ivory tower, today they help and serve in the larger world beyond the campus.

Out of this mix of learning, discovery, and service, a new and dynamic institution was forged: the modern American state university. Its peculiar, multiple commitments made it unique: transmitting the knowledge of the ages from generation to generation, creating brand new knowledge, and applying that knowledge to the needs of the world. In these three missions lie metaphors for much that gives meaning to human life: The old teach the young who in turn repay the debt by transcending the inherited wisdom and imparting new truths to another generation. All the participants share a commitment to

improving human life, by testing their competing truths in the real world of experience and sorrow. All share the common joys of learning, discovery, and service.

I am describing an ideal, of course, but great institutions rest upon ideals that touch what's basic in human life. For historic reasons, the ideal of the state university came belatedly to the northeastern United States. Public universities in such states as Michigan, North Carolina, and California have longer, different traditions from Rutgers. Only in recent decades have the people of New Jersey shown signs of embracing their state university. Not surprisingly the embrace has been tentative, and we at Rutgers sometimes ran into trouble translating the ideal into the reality. We did not explain it very well to the people of our state. Perhaps we did not fully understand it ourselves.

But the tradition is worthy of our embrace, especially now in the early years of the 21st century. It may be a troubled time, and New Jersey is going to need a fully developed state university to meet the requirements and expectations of its citizens. Rutgers accepts the challenge to be that university.

We envision a place where learning, discovery, and service are nurtured and entwined; a place where there is tolerance for the student who challenges the professor's ideas, kudos for the researcher who demolishes old theories, admiration for the faculty member who finds a new way to make knowledge socially useful. It will be a place where the undergraduate whose parents never attended college works alongside a member of the National Academy of Sciences in her laboratory; a place where the kid from Cherry Hill does community service in Camden; a place where reading a work of classical literature lights a life-long fire in a human spirit. In New Jersey, let that place be Rutgers!

But being a leading state university isn't easy, and doing so will require us to bear a paradoxical burden. Are we part of the marketplace or are we aloof from it? We are both. Are we basically about ideas or practice? We are both. Is our highest responsibility at Rutgers to discover or to serve? It is both. Should we focus on our state or should we be part of a worldwide conversation about ideas and ideals? We simply must do both.

So let me say it directly: At Rutgers we create knowledge for its own sake. We are about discovery and the rich treasury of the greatest human creations, about ideals that have no bottom line except the enrichment of our species through the arts, humanities, and the sciences. There are no world-class universities without strength in English as well as engineering, in classics as well as computer science, in musical theory as well as molecular biology. *Whatever* the marketplace may say, *we* must ensure the excellence of the humanities and the arts.

But our university also creates knowledge that is useful, especially to the people of New Jersey. Examples abound. The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development does research to improve job training practices and public policies so that Americans will be more productive and prosperous. The Heldrich Center has projects and partners across the country, but through its work with the pharmaceutical and

medical technology industries of our state and through its special relationship with the New Jersey Department of Labor, it benefits New Jersey first.

The Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences at Cook College is an international leader in oceanography, and because of that expertise it is the center of education and research to preserve New Jersey's coastal waterways and improve their shellfish products. The Center for Molecular and Behavioral Neuroscience in Newark is recognized as a world leader in addressing the needs of children with hearing and learning disabilities. The first beneficiaries of the Center's research and outreach are the children of New Jersey.

These endeavors, selected from among dozens I could have named, show that Rutgers is part of the fabric of New Jersey and contributes deeply to the betterment of our state. But there *is* a paradox here: We serve our state best when our aspirations reach beyond its borders. It is the national and international distinction of our faculty and our research that makes us most valuable to the people here at home, especially to our 50,000 students.

While we recite these achievements, we must remember *where* we are—in New Jersey, a state with extraordinary comparative advantages. In location, wealth, climate, history, agriculture, industry, transportation, and demography, New Jersey is one of the best endowed locales on earth. Would anyone trade away our colonial heritage, our beautiful shore and northwest highlands, our fast-paced way of life, our high-tech economy, the exceptional diversity of our population, or even our Turnpike Exits? This is New Jersey. It's not Paris. It's not California. It is proud of its proximity to Philadelphia and New York, but it's not them either. This is New Jersey and its state university is called *Rutgers*.

My family and I have lived the last decade of our lives in places of mildness and gentleness—Chapel Hill and Seattle, two of the loveliest towns on the planet. Now upon returning to New Jersey, I find a bit less gentleness but so much passion, individualism, energy and sheer brainpower. Our Rutgers students, to their credit, share these traits of grappling and scrapping, of *not* thinking the world owes them success on a silver platter, of willingness to work hard for whatever they achieve.

These are powerful characteristics of our state's personality, but we don't always realize the full benefit of them. How much more could we accomplish by pulling together in the same direction? How can we align New Jersey's exceptional energy, intelligence, and wealth to advance our collective goals? It is time to do that, because the opportunities facing Rutgers are very great, and we must work together to seize them.

Our most important goal is to move Rutgers to the top tier of America's public research universities. We have made great strides in recent years—in research funding where we are gaining rapidly, in the stature of our faculty whose memberships in the national academies and whose appointments to prestigious fellowships are increasing annually, and in the quality of our students. It is now time for Rutgers to undertake its

most ambitious effort ever to enter the first ranks of American universities. Our goal is to move our whole university toward the level of our Department of Philosophy, now ranked number one in the country!

Imagine a university where most undergraduates, as well as graduate and professional students, are engaged in research or other forms of experiential learning, where teaching and research are inherently interdisciplinary, and where the boundaries between the institution and the rest of society are blurred almost to the point of invisibility. Together we can make this dream a reality. Together we can move Rutgers to the place of distinction that should be occupied by The State University of New Jersey.

Wherever the innovation economy is thriving, a research university is the engine of that growth. This means collaboration between universities, industry, and government—a goal that Governor McGreevey has articulated so well. This means technology transfer from faculty laboratories to the private sector. This means graduates who are prepared to occupy demanding positions in the high-technology economy. If New Jersey is going to reassume the position of economic leadership it had before the current downturn, then Rutgers must be strong enough to lead the way.

The Report of the Commission on Health Science, Education, and Training provides a vision that is now receiving the serious attention it deserves. The potential benefits of the Commission's proposals are considerable. They include collaboration in teaching and research across the disciplines, particularly in the health sciences; opportunities for Rutgers students to study and conduct research in fields to which they would not otherwise have access; increased research funding from the federal government and the private sector; and the growth and development of our state's knowledge-based economy.

And yet right now, higher education in New Jersey is failing to fulfill its single most important responsibility, and that is educating the young men and women of our state. New Jersey leads the nation by far in the loss of high school graduates who go to college in other states. This is a brain drain of teenagers, most of whom never return to live and work in New Jersey. Right now, as increasing numbers of children of the baby boom generation complete high school and head for college, New Jersey stands to fall further and further behind in providing higher education for its own sons and daughters. We need to confront this problem by increasing the enrollment capacity of our state's colleges and universities—not only by putting more seats in the classrooms but also by assuring the quality of education our students receive. Generations before us met comparable challenges. We must do the same.

In the decades following World War II, my parents' generation of Americans invested in education and opportunity. Beginning with the GI bill, they granted financial aid to college students who needed it. They expanded access to higher education beyond the traditional collegiate ranks of advantaged white men—to women as well as men, to people of color, and to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. That post-war generation of Americans used many means to achieve their goals. They greatly enlarged

traditional universities like this one, they invented a whole new kind of institution called community colleges, they built buildings, appointed faculty, invested in scientific research and technology, found new ways to serve the nation and the world—and they were not afraid to make the investments and sacrifices required to do these things.

Imagine if Americans of the '50s, '60s, and '70s had *not* invested in education and opportunity. What a poorer and less egalitarian society we would have today. Now it is *our* responsibility to ensure that the next generation enjoys the same opportunities we did to obtain a college degree and enter a prosperous society. Our children deserve outstanding higher education, right here in New Jersey!

The painful truth is that state support is currently inadequate to maintain either the quality or the capacity of our state's colleges and universities. By whatever measure you choose—the percentage of state revenue that is allocated to higher education, or state-appropriated dollars per student—Rutgers and New Jersey rank near the bottom of the country. I take no pleasure in reciting this fact, and I will not belabor it. But together we must confront and remedy the shortage of resources for Rutgers and for all of higher education in our state.

There are only two strategies for doing this, and we must utilize them both. The first is to connect our university much more deeply to the needs and aspirations of the people of New Jersey and persuade them to invest in what we do. If we have been aloof and apart, we must become more engaged. If we have taken state support for granted or if we have regarded it as our just due, then we must acknowledge that this support is not automatically owed to us. It must be earned afresh by every generation at Rutgers. If we have failed to communicate fully the benefits of a state university, then we must tell our story better. If we do *our* part, the people of New Jersey will do *theirs*.

Second we must rely ever more heavily on other sources of support than the state—tuition, federal and corporate research support, self-supporting educational programs, technology transfer, private gifts and grants. Every one of these revenue sources is already rising at Rutgers, but there are cautions associated with each.

As tuition rises, to sustain our educational quality, we must protect the breadth of access and opportunity at Rutgers by ensuring that financial aid is available to students who need it. As support from the federal government and the private sector increases, we must guard against conflicts of interest and sustain the academic quality of disciplines that have little access to outside sources of support. As private philanthropy grows, we must guard jealously our independence and affirm *our* responsibility for the university's intellectual and educational directions.

None of this is new. Universities have always been influenced by their sources of support and are always challenged to maintain an independent set of values—autonomy, integrity, accessibility, openness, freedom of thought and expression, civility, and equality. These values are never entirely secure. They must be reaffirmed and defended and held in trust for future generations who will, in turn, be required to restate them and

defend them again. As we secure the resources Rutgers needs, we must also secure its values.

And among these values, none are greater than diversity and civility. Our campus in Newark is justly proud of being the most diverse university campus in America—a distinction it has held for many years. But our Camden and New Brunswick campuses are not far behind. The student body of Rutgers looks like the population of our state! This healthy mix of heritages and colors did not happen by accident. Virtually non-existent forty years ago, the diversity of our students was achieved through the hard work and commitment of successive generations of Rutgers men and women.

Why did they do it? First, because a college education is essential to opportunity in America, and it was not right—it *is* not right—for anyone to be held back because of their ethnicity, background, or heritage. Simple social justice demanded—and demands—the diversity of our university. Let us remember with pride the Rutgers students of African American heritage who taught us that in protest in the spring of 1969.

The second reason for diversity at Rutgers is that *everyone* gets a better education in a diverse environment. When you go to school with people who are different from you, who have unfamiliar backgrounds and divergent perspectives, you become better educated and more fully prepared for life and work than you would be if your classmates and teachers all looked alike. The quality of a Rutgers education depends directly on the diversity of our university.

Social justice and academic excellence are the two imperishable motivations for our diversity. For these reasons, no matter what the United States Supreme Court decides in the Michigan cases, we will, consistent with the law, maintain the hard-won diversity of Rutgers.

We must also maintain the civility of our campuses and encourage dialogue with dignity among divergent groups. Now more than ever, our society needs its young men and women to spend nurturing time in a place where differences of opinion are respected and incivility is unacceptable. In New Jersey, let that place be Rutgers!

And so, as I prepare to close these remarks, let me return to the subject of the relationship between a true state university and the state of which it is a part. The relationship between Rutgers and New Jersey must become far deeper and more extensive than it is today, and we at Rutgers must bear the largest share of responsibility for making it so.

This means forging stronger connections with the K-12 schools and the community colleges, many of whose teachers *and* students we educate. It means strengthening our special ties to Camden, Newark, and New Brunswick/Piscataway, our hometowns, for whose revitalization and well-being we are working with our many partners in these communities. It also means deepening our ties to the *entire* state of New Jersey, whose public research university we are. Whatever challenges New Jerseyans are

facing, whether in education, economic development, workforce training, transportation, health care, or environmental protection, there will be Rutgers men and women working alongside them to help meet their needs.

To Governor McGreevey and all our elected officials, to the tens of thousands of Rutgers alumni, to the parents of our students and our future students, to my colleagues throughout our state's schools, colleges, and universities, to the leaders in our state's business community and civic life, to *all* the people of New Jersey, we make this pledge: Rutgers will be *your* state university. We will work with you to meet the needs of the people of our state, to provide an outstanding education to our students, to discover and apply new knowledge, and to serve. And we, in turn, will expect you to help us and to support us with adequate funding. Rutgers and New Jersey are not going anywhere, *except* with each other. Neither of us can let the other down.

Varied as we are, different as are the routes that brought us to Rutgers, we share some deep convictions. We know that learning feeds the human spirit and advances human progress. We know that knowledge and understanding are the highest gifts we can offer the young. We know that broadening access to learning strengthens our common civic and economic life. And we know that putting knowledge to work in the world lets us serve needs and solve problems that matter to everyone.

This university still lives out those fundamental values and convictions. They run like veins of gold through everything we do. They underlie our claim to serve the public good. And they must *also* sustain our spirits. For even amid difficulties and frustrations, doing work that affirms one's deepest values is a privilege.

So guided both by our hearts and our heads, with our historic missions and values intact, our pride in New Jersey strong, and our commitment to the next generation as deep as our parents' commitment was to us, it's *our* turn to take care of this place called Rutgers. And together we will.